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ABSTRACT

Much of the school choice debate today is centered on charter schools, which are similar to private schools in that they operate outside the bureaucracy of the public school system and have some level of autonomy in their organization and curriculum delivery. Many charter schools serve specific religious, ethnic, or demographic needs. Parents and educators who are charter school advocates define charter schools as independent public schools, designed and primarily operated by educators, parents, community leaders, and educational entrepreneurs. By the fall of 1998 there were 1200 charter schools nationwide educating 200,000 children. This paper first provides some historical information about charter schools and the impetus for their creation. The paper notes that, although there are some controversies about charter schools and powerful opposition to them, they thrive because they get results, particularly in charter school students' reading and writing scores. According to the paper, in 50 out of 53 studies, conducted by government, university, and other independent bodies, charter schools appear in a positive light. In fact, many studies indicated charter school students perform at or above national standards and attain higher standardized test assessment scores in reading and writing. The paper then discusses possible reasons for the positive results of reading and writing scores of charter school students. It concludes that, while the available data do not show that charter schools have significantly different curricula on literacy development, the general success of charter school students has been attributed to many factors. (Contains an 11-item bibliography.) (NKA)

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Charter Schools and Their Impact on Reading and Writing.

by Abida Ripley

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Charter Schools

Abida Ripley

CHARTER SCHOOLS AND THEIR IMPACT ON READING AND WRITING

Students feel challenged,
teachers feel empowered,
parents are content.- Summary of *Going it Alone: A Study of Massachusetts Charter Schools* reported in CER, 2000)

Introduction

The first American charter school opened its doors in 1992, and public debate over the issue of school choice has continued ever since. State and federal legislation has alternately expanded and limited school choice, and the experiment has mixed results. An inter-district choice program in Minnesota took hold quickly, supported by politicians and embraced by parents (Pipho 1998, p. 261). Michigan enacted pro-charter school legislation in 1993, saw it declared unconstitutional in 1994, and redrafted legislation several times since, to allow for varying levels of school choice and public funding for private schools (Tucker, 1998, p. 28). An initiative that would offer each student the means to choose an appropriate school, private or public, was defeated in a general election in California. New school choice measures in Pennsylvania are facing legal challenges. A voucher system in Wisconsin has been praised for its revitalization of schools in Milwaukee and other cities, while a new magnet school program in Montgomery County, Maryland was criticized as leading to increased social and racial division in the suburbs of the mostly-black District of Columbia (Henig,1995, p. 729).

School choice in general refers to allowing parents and students to choose the school they attend, instead of having that choice made for them by the boundaries of the district within which they reside. Much of the school choice debate today is centered on charter schools, which are similar to private schools in that they operate outside the bureaucracy of the public school system and have some level of autonomy in their organization and curriculum delivery. However, they are still considered public schools; like district public schools they are publicly funded according to enrollment, although not always at the same level as their district public counterparts. For example, Minnesota and Arizona charters are funded at about 75 percent and 80 percent, respectively, of a district school's per-pupil allocation. Many charter schools serve a specific religious, ethnic or needs demographic (for example, at-risk students), and others focus on developing specific skills, be they vocational, technical, artistic, scientific or literary.

Parents and educators who are charter schools advocates define these schools in somewhat stronger terms:

> Charter schools are independent public schools, designed and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs and others. They are sponsored by designated local or state educational organizations who monitor their quality and integrity, but allow them to operate freed from the traditional bureaucratic and regulatory red tape that hog-ties public schools. Freed from such micromanagement, charter schools design and deliver

programs tailored to educational excellence and community needs. Because they are schools of choice, they are held to the highest level of accountability - consumer demand. (CER, 2000)

In their nine years of operation, charter schools, like private schools generally, have achieved better overall reading, writing and vocabulary test scores than public schools. Critics of the charter school system question whether this is the result of the school itself– the charter school's philosophy, teachers, methods, resources–or the composition of its student body. Some critics have used charter schools' actual academic success against them, accusing them of attracting top performers and the funds that would go with them away from the public school system (a practice called "creaming").

In this essay, the data and facts surrounding charter school education, specifically as it pertains to reading and writing efficacy and the make-up of the schools' student body will be examined. Let us start with a brief look at the impetus behind charter school creation, followed by a conclusion about the role of other charter school stakeholders–parents and teachers–on charter schools' test scores.

Impetus for Charter School Creation

By the fall of 1998, there were 1,200 charter schools nation-wide educating 200,000 children (Tucker,1998). By the fall of 2000, the number of schools blossomed to 2,000 and the number of children educated within them more than doubled, to half-a-million. Thirty-six states now have legislation that supports school choice, but charter school distribution is not equalized (CER, 2000). In Michigan, for example, only one percent of the student population attends charter schools, while Arizona is home to one-third of the nation's charters (Tucker, 1998. P. 28).

Despite their growing popularity, the very existence of charter schools remains controversial. The controversy around charter schools begins with the very act of defining the basic goals of school choice initiatives. These goals are usually trifold:

(1) to expand the range of educational opportunities available to parents in the school districts of a given state;

(2) to equalize the distribution of tax monies and other public revenues to families with children of school age, so that those families sending children to private schools are given their fair share of their contribution to the school monies; and

(3) to retain the core public school system, so that the poorer or less desirable school districts will not be deprived of neighborhood schools and teachers by inability to compete with expensive private schools. (Witte, 1995)

The conflicting values of these three goals are readily apparent, and, together or separately, they present challenges. Expanding the "range of educational opportunities" conflicts with the ethos that all children should be getting a similar sort of education. Many teachers, teachers' unions, politicians and other stakeholders feel that increasing school choice takes away money and initiative from reforming the entire public school system. The religious component of some charter schools raises concern that public funding for private schools may violate the Constitution's ban on state support for religion. Other critics raise concerns about the "Balkanization" or "resegregation" of the American school system, arguing that charter schools allow "parents with all sorts of prejudices to protect their kids from

undesirables" by opening a school of their own (Bruce J. Biddle, quoted in Bowman, 2000). The most frequent charge against charter schools is "creaming"—parents taking the smartest kids out of public schools to enter charter schools, leaving an under-funded public school system with the dregs. Critics say that for this reason, charter schools hinder rather than pioneer school reform.

The National Education Association (NEA) is a strong and persistent opponent of charter schools and other school choice initiatives. As the most powerful lobbying force in most state legislatures (GOP and Democratic alike), the NEA effectively controls many of the local school boards. It also wields virtual veto power over the educational congressional committees. Their record is unmarked by support for most forms of educational creativity or accountability: "It opposes teacher testing standardized tests for students, merit pay, more flexible certification of teachers, any whiff of privatization and—most vehemently—any meaningful form of school choice" (Klein, 1993, p. 21).

The NEA has been attacked as a monopolistic bureaucracy with a stranglehold on the state public schools. In return, it charges that most school choice programs are elitist, racist and anti-poor. When charter school legislation was proposed, the NEA took exception to the inclusion of families in upper income brackets in receiving a basic per pupil subsidy, arguing that only the wealthy could afford the kind of transportation and boarding involved in out of district schooling for their children. In Michigan, the experience of more than 30 "charter schools" founded by wealthy communities was cited as proof that community-based schools free of state or federal bureaucratic management were academically successful (Shokrai, 1999).

Despite these controversies and powerful opposition, charter schools thrive. Why? The answer is deceptively simple: charter schools get results, particularly in reading and writing scores.

Charter School and Tests

The Center of Education Reform, one of the key players in education reform and an ardent supporter of school choice and charter schools, reports that 50 out of 53 studies, conducted by various government, university and other independent bodies between 1995 and 2000, showed charter schools in a positive light, both for the students within and the students without. Many of the studies indicated charter school students performing at or above national standards and attaining higher standardized test assessment scores in reading and writing, as well as mathematics and other subjects. Sponsored by the Colorado Department of Education and released in January 2000, "The Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation Study: The Characteristics, Status and Performance Record of Colorado Charter Schools", found that performance of charter schools on state assessment is stronger than the sponsoring district averages and when compared to other socio-economically similar traditional schools. A 1999 Colorado study reported that while charter schools make up two percent of Colorado schools, they comprise a full 20 percent of Colorado "schools of excellence."

Moreover, the 1997 *Colorado Charter Schools Evaluation Study*, prepared by the Clayton Foundation for the Colorado Department of Education, reported that the majority of Colorado charter schools were serving students of color, students who were educationally disadvantaged by poverty and students who were eligible for special education services. According to this study, charter students performed better than the statewide average on the state 4th grade reading and writing assessment.

Despite the diversity of charter school legislation and demographics, the results are consistent nation-wide. The "Arizona Charter School Progress

Evaluation", prepared by Lori A. Mulholland at Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, was released in March 1999 as part of the ongoing evaluation of Arizona charters. Mulholland reported that standardized test scores met or exceeded those of traditional public schools. A February 1999 study sponsored by the Michigan Department of Education showed that the improvement in Michigan Educational Assessment Program test scores among charters was greater than among a comparison group of traditional schools.

The "1998 Minnesota Charter Schools Evaluation Final Report", co-prepared by the Minnesota State Board of Education and University of Minnesota Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, reported that 50 percent of the charters had a higher percentage of students scoring above the national mean on the reading tests in 1996 and 1997 (similar results were reported in mathematics test scores as well). Moreover, the 1997 numbers for graduating students showed 71 percent of charter students reporting higher percentages on the reading test. These results were considered all the more significant as many of the Minnesota charter schools are designed for "at-risk" students.

Statistics for the 1998-1999 school year from Massachusetts showed charter school students scoring higher than students in public schools—five points on average—on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, which tested proficiency of students in fourth, eight and tenth grade in several core areas.

The results from these studies largely refute fears about "creaming." Many charters are targeted specifically at "problem" students who do poorly in their previous schools or who are even considered "at risk" for dropping out. Even in "not-at-risk" charter schools, the academic performance of entering students is generally at or below district or national averages, not above. However, as the Massachusetts Department of Education found in its 1997 study of test results from Massachusetts Charter Schools, students' grades often raise dramatically after they transfer to a charter school, or after their school transforms into a charter. The U.S. Department Education's "National Study of Charter Schools", released in January 2000, reported similar test scores and demographic characteristics for charters and public schools. The study showed long waiting lists at seven out of 10 charters, lower student-teacher ratios, higher percentages of poorer children and, in specific states, significantly higher percentages of minority or economically disadvantaged children.

Much of the conflicting data—in which charters report lower than average rates on tests—comes from schools with a mission to serve primarily at-risk students. For example, the 1998 "Texas Open Enrollment Charter School Evaluation" reported that charter students scored lower on assessment tests than traditional students, but 11 of 19 charter schools included in the reported sample were comprised mainly of at-risk student constituencies. A 1998 report from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, which found that charter school students performed at or below (but not above) district and national averages, also was based on data from charter schools, more than half of which serve mostly disadvantaged/at-risk youth.

Why do charter schools outperform their public district counterparts? A number of explanations are possible. Although "creaming" may not be a factor, school size and teacher and student ratio definitely are. According to the U.S Department of Education, charter schools have a median enrollment of 150 students, and a student-teacher ratio of 16 to 1; many are smaller. Students receive more one-to-one attention, and their learning takes place in more intimate environments than that of their district peers.

Then, there is the issue of parental involvement and motivation. To send your child to a charter school requires reflection, decision and action. Parents who are motivated enough to research school choice possibilities are

likely to be more involved in their children's education at home. However, there is no data that address this issue directly. The fact that several studies report many students performed below district standards prior to transferring to a charter school suggests this relationship, once studied, will not be a straightforward one.

Parents' satisfaction with teacher is remarkably high in charter schools. According to the 1999 "Arizona Charter School Progress Evaluation Study", teachers are the best feature of charters, according to both parents and students. The next best features, notes the study, are school size, class size and attitudes toward parents. Critics frequently suggest that charter-school teachers are less qualified than their public counterparts. Data from Massachusetts suggests otherwise: 80 percent of the charter school teachers in the state are certified, just like district teachers, and 50 percent hold a Masters degree or higher.

Teachers who work in charter schools, we should perhaps note, report high job satisfaction. Critics have suggested that charter schools would skimp on money by hiring unqualified instructors. It appears that the reverse is true. Charter schools, reports the SRI International for Legislative Analyst's office of the State of California, pay their teachers better.

The charter school movement is relatively new, and it exists in a rapidly changing political and social climate. Critics and advocates of charters are poles apart, and the tone of the debate is highly emotional. "The big thing missing in the charter school research world is any substantial, reliable evidence that tells us whether charter students are doing better than regular public school students", wrote one critic in response to Center for Education Reform's report on the state of charter schools, which listed the 53 major studies conducted on charter schools since 1995 (Louis Huerta, quoted in Bowman 2000); another accused the Center of "clearly misrepresenting" various data (Gerald W. Bracey, quoted in Bowman 2000).

Whatever the critics say, and whatever barriers they continue to raise to charter school existence and funding, charters are having an effect. The growth in both the number of charter schools and number of students between 1998 and 2000 is nothing short of phenomenal. Charter supporters also claim that in addition to being "innovative and accountable" and creating "opportunities for the children that attend them," charters "have a 'ripple' effect on traditional public schools within their jurisdiction" (CER 2000). But the factor that is probably most important is that parents like charter schools and believe their children are better served by them.

Conclusion

Most parents prefer the creation of expanded choice, even if it has the consequence of creating or reinforcing social, racial and religious divisions in their community. A 1999 survey of 12,812 parents with children enrolled in Arizona's charter schools found 66 percent of them giving their charter an A+ or A grade (31 and 35 percent respectively) for quality of education. The survey also showed that few of these parents rated their previous school as an A, and 72 percent of all respondents planned to re-enroll their child(ren) in the charter school (CER, 2000).

Parents appear to choose charter schools in search of something better for their children; they seem to believe that the education their children are getting at a charter is better than the one they would get (or were getting) at the designated district schools. The limited existing data seem to bear them out, although, due to the unique nature and circumstances of each charter school, it is difficult to determine one specific template to the charter schools' success.

While it could not be established from the available data that the public or charter schools have any significantly different curricula on literacy development, the general success of charter school students have been attributed to many factors including "creaming". The demographic, statistical and test data on charter schools, charter students, charter teachers and charter parents is still not yet sufficient to draw strong correlations. With such a limitation on present knowledge, we must conclude this exploration into the world of charter schools with a statement about the role of free enterprise in education: "...a charter must perform to stay in business, whereas the traditional public school perpetuates, regardless of performance" (Allen, 2000). Whether this kind of market competition is a positive or negative process in education remains to be seen.

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** The various charter studies referred to in the paper are listed in full at the Center for Education Reform URL: http://edreform.com/